

# Research report: Improving access to, and success on, sandwich courses for students from widening participation backgrounds

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## Contents

<b>1. Executive summary</b> .....	4
1.1 Methodology.....	4
1.2 Key findings.....	4
1.3 Recommendations.....	5
<b>2. Introduction</b> .....	6
2.1 Background and context.....	6
<b>3. Methodology</b> .....	7
3.1 Research aims and objectives.....	7
3.2 Key research questions.....	7
3.3 Overview of the research design.....	8
3.3.1 Phase One. Exploratory qualitative research.....	8
3.3.2 Phase Two - development of a Theory of Change.....	12
3.3.3 Phase Three. User testing.....	13
3.3.4 Ethical considerations.....	15
3.4 Data analysis methods.....	16
3.5 Rigour of approach.....	17
3.5.1 Reflection on researcher positioning.....	17
<b>4. Findings and discussion</b> .....	18
4.1 Phase One. Exploratory qualitative research.....	18
4.1.1 Types of sandwich course available.....	18
4.1.2 Trends in student participation in sandwich courses.....	19
4.1.3 Promotion of sandwich course opportunities.....	21
4.1.4 Students' decision-making processes.....	22
4.1.5 Barriers – to taking and/or succeeding on a placement.....	24
4.1.6 HEP action to reduce or remove barriers.....	29
4.1.7 Impact of taking a sandwich course.....	30
4.2 Phase Two -development of a Theory of Change.....	31
4.3 Phase Three. User testing.....	32
4.3.1 Feedback on specific aspects of the Theory of Change.....	32
4.3.2 Priority areas.....	37
4.3.3 Additional suggestions.....	37
4.3.4 Revisions to the Theory of Change.....	39
4.4 Unexpected outcomes.....	39
<b>5. Limitations</b> .....	39

<b>6. Conclusions</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>7. Key learning and recommendations</b> .....	<b>41</b>
7.1 Recommendations.....	41
7.2 Suggestions for further research.....	43
<b>8. References</b> .....	<b>44</b>
<b>9. Appendices</b> .....	<b>46</b>

## 1. Executive summary

This report was commissioned by The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) to address gaps in our knowledge about the barriers to students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds accessing, and succeeding on, sandwich year courses. Sandwich courses are defined as undergraduate degree programmes that include a year-long placement in industry or part-time work-experience alongside a degree-course. Existing research has demonstrated that considerable advantages follow from taking a sandwich course, particularly in relation to accessing professional-level employment on graduation, and that these advantages are often heightened for those from WP backgrounds. Nevertheless, it is also known that students from WP backgrounds are much less likely to take up the opportunity of a sandwich year. Although there has been some limited research on the reasons for this, such studies have often focussed on a single higher education provider (HEP), or a single degree subject. In addition, while some of these studies have made recommendations about how the problems they identify can be addressed, in no cases have recommendations been tested with prospective users. To address these gaps, this research provides a broad understanding of the barriers to accessing, and succeeding on, sandwich courses experienced by WP students – and to develop and test a Theory of Change to help remove the identified barriers.

### 1.1 Methodology

The research comprised three parts:

- An exploratory phase, based on qualitative interviews with 12 members of staff from 10 HEPs and 20 undergraduate students from two HEPs;
- The development of a Theory of Change, based on the findings from the exploratory phase as well as extant research in this area;
- A ‘user testing’ phase, in which feedback on key aspects of the Theory of Change was sought from 20 undergraduate students, all from WP backgrounds, from four HEPs.

### 1.2 Key findings

Based on the interviews with students and staff, a review of extant research and the ‘user testing’ of the Theory of Change, four key areas where HEPs could take action to

improve access to, and success during, sandwich courses for those from WP backgrounds were identified:

- Data collection, access and use: including the processes required to ensure that data on the student journey through a sandwich course is accurately recorded and made available for evaluation and analysis;
- Policy development: including the policies HEPs can implement to encourage flexible sandwich course formats, and financial responsibility (in terms of both providing financial support to students, and developing students' own financial awareness);
- Information sharing: including ensuring that information about sandwich courses is made available early, provided in accessible formats, and more closely integrated with degree programmes;
- Support: including support provided in the periods of time before a decision about a sandwich year is made; before such a year commences; during the year; and once it has been completed.

### 1.3 Recommendations

Five main recommendations emerge from this research. A sector-level response is required, to ensure common practice across HEPs, and that WP students are well-supported in their sandwich year choices, whichever institution they attend. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that HEPs operate in different contexts, with different challenges and varying levels of resource available. This may have a significant influence on which actions HEPs choose to prioritise and which they are able to pursue. In taking forward these recommendations, HEPs are encouraged to make use of TASO's [Enhanced Theory of Change](#) and build their own Theory of Change, sensitive to their local context.

- Improve the collection and use of HEPs' institutional data relating to sandwich courses.
- Conduct more robust evaluation.
- Further develop internal policies on the provision of sandwich courses.
- Improve the timing and accessibility of sandwich course information.
- Enhance support provided to students.

Many of these recommendations would benefit all higher education students, not just those from WP backgrounds.

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1 Background and context

Over recent decades in the UK, ‘employability’ has become a key focus of many higher education providers (HEPs), to ensure that their students are prepared as well as possible for their transition into the labour market, on graduation (Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Durazzi, 2021; Tomlinson, 2012). Sandwich courses are a popular mechanism for students to gain work-related skills and experience in working environments. Indeed, there is evidence of a strong positive correlation between participation in sandwich courses and employment, particularly in relation to high quality ‘graduate level’ jobs (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009). Previous research, conducted for TASO, indicated that students who took a sandwich course (with some time in employment) went on to earn about £6000 more than the average full-time student three years after graduation (Ramaiah and Robinson, 2022). Other studies have shown similarly positive outcomes, including on academic performance, when sandwich course students return to their degree programme (Brooks and Youngson, 2014; Jones, Green and Higson, 2017).

Extant research suggests that the benefits of taking a sandwich course are particularly marked for students from WP backgrounds. Analysis of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Graduate Outcomes surveys for 2011-2014, conducted by Kerrigan, Manktelow and Simmons (2018), indicated that while WP graduates of full-time undergraduate degrees were 10% less likely than their non-WP peers to be in professional-level employment six months after graduation, the difference between the two groups was only 2% for those who had taken a sandwich course. Similar results were found in Eade’s (2019) analysis of data with respect to a single HEP.

It is also the case, however, that students from WP backgrounds are less likely to undertake such courses (Kerrigan, Manktelow and Simmons, 2018). Some initial work exploring the reasons why disadvantaged and underrepresented students do not participate in sandwich courses at the same rate as their more advantaged peers has drawn attention to the impact of inequalities in social capital, with those from WP backgrounds often having fewer contacts within professional employment to help set up placements and/or provide advice on applications (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth and Rose, 2013; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013). WP students have also been shown to be disadvantaged by economic factors – making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to undertake unpaid placements, for example (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth and Rose, 2013; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013). Nevertheless, much of this work has focused on

types of sandwich course (e.g., Allen et al.'s (2013) research focused on the creative industries) and/or experiences in a very small number of HEPs (often a single case study institution). Moreover, although many of these studies make recommendations about how the problems they identify can be addressed, in no cases were recommendations tested with prospective users.

To address these gaps, this research aims to provide a broad understanding of the barriers to accessing, and then succeeding on, sandwich courses experienced by WP students. This involved collecting data from 10 HEPs across England (of different sizes, geographical locations, and experiences of running sandwich courses) and then developing and testing a Theory of Change with students from a variety of WP backgrounds.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research aims and objectives**

This project explores equality gaps in the uptake of sandwich courses and placements within sandwich courses. It investigates the barriers to WP students accessing sandwich courses and potential solutions. It then develops a Theory of Change that sets out the mechanisms through which sandwich courses can be used to improve employability outcomes for WP students. It draws on data from staff working in sandwich course-related roles in HEPs and from WP students themselves.

#### **3.2 Key research questions**

The primary research questions are:

1. What are the main barriers to students from WP backgrounds accessing and succeeding on sandwich courses/placements?
2. How can these barriers be overcome?

The secondary research questions are:

1. What are some of the main equality gaps with respect to WP students' participation in, and success on, sandwich courses/placements?
2. To what extent do HEP staff and WP students share the same understanding of the barriers?
3. What Theory of Change can be developed to address key barriers and equality gaps?

### 3.3 Overview of the research design

As illustrated in [Table 1](#), the research comprises three phases: (1) an exploratory phase, based on qualitative interviews with undergraduate students and members of staff responsible for sandwich courses; (2) the development of a Theory of Change, based on the findings from the exploratory phase; and (3) a ‘user testing’ phase, in which feedback on key aspects of the Theory of Change is sought from students with WP backgrounds.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were used as the main method of data collection, on the grounds that they enabled detailed data to be generated from both students and staff on potentially sensitive topics and allowed sufficient flexibility for the researcher to explore previously unanticipated issues, brought up by participants.

*Table 1: Three-phased approach to the study*

Phase	Method
1. Exploratory phase	Qualitative interviews with undergraduate students and members of staff
2. Theory of Change development	Findings from the qualitative data are used to inform the development of a Theory of Change model
3. User testing	The Theory of Change and potential solutions (activities) are tested with WP students

#### 3.3.1 Phase One. Exploratory qualitative research

In the first phase of the project, interviews were conducted with HEPs and undergraduate students.

##### Higher education provider interviews

Interviews were conducted with members of staff responsible for sandwich courses in 10 HEPs. A total of 12 individuals were interviewed, as two HEPs included two staff members in the same interview. The HEPs were chosen, in consultation with TASO, to include some institutions with a long and successful track record of delivering sandwich courses, as well as others that have set up such schemes more recently. The sample was also chosen to include diversity with respect to the type of HEP (e.g., Russell Group, pre-1992 outside Russell Group, post-1992) and geographical location (in



different parts of England). To ensure the anonymity of interviewees, each HEP has been allocated a reference number (1-10) which is referred to when reporting data. Details about the sample are provided in [Table 2](#).

*Table 2. Details of the HEPs at which staff interviewees were based*

Reference number	Relative size of sandwich course programme	Type of HEP
HEP 1	Large programme (about 60% of students take sandwich course)	Pre-92, not Russell Group
HEP 2	Large programme (about 30% of students)	Pre-92, not Russell Group
HEP 3	Large programme (about 65% of students)	Pre-92, not Russell Group
HEP 4	Small programme (number for whole HEP not available)	Post-92
HEP 5	Small programme (under 1% of students)	Russell Group
HEP 6	Small programme (percentage not known)	Post-92
HEP 7	Medium size programme (about 9% cent of students)	Russell Group
HEP 8	Large programme (more than 50% of students)	Post-92
HEP 9	Small programme (4-5% of students)	Pre-92, not Russell Group
HEP 10	Small programme (4-5% of students)	Pre-92, not Russell Group

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed and revised with TASO ([see Appendix 1](#)). It included questions about how HEPs organise and promote sandwich courses; the extent to which they have equality gaps in the uptake of such courses; what they perceive to be barriers to participation for students from WP backgrounds; and any action they have taken to increase uptake by this group. Interviewees were also asked about any evidence they had collected about the impact of sandwich courses on the subsequent employment of their students.

Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. They were recorded and an automatic transcript was generated. Three research team members conducted interviews and made individual analytical notes following each one. The project team then developed an analysis grid to facilitate analytical comparisons and the emergence of themes (Milford et al. 2017). Further details about the analysis are provided in [Section 3.4](#).

## Student interviews

Interviews were conducted with 20 students to understand their perspectives and experiences of sandwich courses. They were chosen from two HEPs with differing experiences of sandwich course provision: HEP 2 and HEP 4. As [Table 2](#) indicates, HEP 2 is a pre-92 institution with a relatively large and well-established sandwich course programme. In contrast, HEP 4 is a post-92 institution with a small and recently established sandwich course programme.

The sample of students was constructed so to include:

- Those from WP backgrounds, and some without such a background;
- Students from Levels 5 (typically second year of an undergraduate course) and 6 (typically final year of an undergraduate course);
- Students who had taken a sandwich course, students who had decided not to take a sandwich course, and students who were considering whether they would or not.

In addition, sample selection sought diversity with respect to gender, ethnicity, and degree subject.

Students were recruited at both HEPs through email distribution lists. All students were offered a £25 voucher as compensation for their time and as a thank you for participating in the interviews. The achieved sample of students is shown in [Table 3](#), and details of the individual students are in [Table 4](#). To ensure the anonymity of students, reference numbers are used to refer to students.

*Table 3. Achieved sample of students in Phase One*

	Students with WP background	Students without WP background
In Level 5, not considering a sandwich course	3	2
In Level 5, considering a sandwich course	3	1
In Level 6, having completed a sandwich course	4	2
In Level 6, having not completed a sandwich course	3	2
TOTAL	13	7

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed, in consultation with TASO ([see Appendix 2](#)). This included questions on students' views about sandwich courses (including their utility for subsequent employment) and any barriers they perceived to taking them up. In addition, the Level 6 students who had taken a sandwich course were asked a series of questions about their experiences, including any challenges they had encountered during their placement, and their views about how well the sandwich year had prepared them for subsequent employment.

The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. They were recorded and an automatic transcript was generated. As with the staff interviews, analytical notes were taken after each interview, using a grid developed by the project team. (See [Section 3.4](#) for further details.)

*Table 4. Sample of students interviewed in Phase One*

Student	Gender	HEP	Degree subject	Level of study	WP or not	Taken/considering sandwich course or not
Student 1	Non-binary	2	Psychology	5	WP	Not considering sandwich course
Student 2	F	2	Biological Sciences	5	WP	Not considering sandwich course
Student 3	F	4	HR Management	5	Not WP	Not considering sandwich course
Student 4	F	2	International Hospitality and Tourism Management	5	Not WP	Not considering sandwich course
Student 5	F	4	Economics	5	WP	Considering sandwich course*
Student 6	F	2	Nutrition and Dietetics	5	WP	Considering sandwich course
Student 7	F	2	Veterinary Medicine	5	WP	Considering sandwich course
Student 8	M	4	Finance	6	Not WP	Completed Sandwich course
Student 9	M	2	Law	5	Not WP	Considering sandwich course

Student 10	M	2	International Business	6	WP	Completed sandwich course
Student 11	F	2	Nutrition and Dietetics	6	WP	Completed sandwich course
Student 12	F	4	Economics	6	Not WP	Did not take sandwich course
Student 13	F	4	Marketing Management	6	WP	Completed sandwich course
Student 14	F	2	Business Management	6	Not WP	Completed sandwich course
Student 15	F	2	Psychology	5	WP	Considering sandwich course
Student 16	F	2	Psychology	6	WP	Did not take sandwich course
Student 17	M	2	Mechanical Engineering	6	WP	Did not take sandwich course
Student 18	M	4	Business Management	6	WP	Did not take sandwich course
Student 19	M	2	Biomedical Sciences	6	Not WP	Did not take sandwich course
Student 20	F	4	Accounting	6	Not WP	Did not take sandwich course

\*NB This student said during the Phase One interview that they were no longer considering a sandwich course. However, by the time of the Phase Three interview, they were considering it again.

### *3.3.2 Phase Two - development of a Theory of Change*

In the second phase of the project, a Theory of Change was constructed to set out the mechanisms through which sandwich courses can be developed to improve employability outcomes for students, and particularly WP students (see [Appendix 3](#) for the short version used with students). A Theory of Change provides a framework to organise the data collected. It is particularly appropriate for materials related to complex and multifaceted change processes, as is the focus here (Barnes, Matka and Sullivan, 2003).

Evidence of how Theories of Change can strengthen organisations and their programmes stresses the need for multiple stakeholder contributions (James, 2011).

The Theory of Change developed in this project was informed by: (i) the evidence gathered in the [TASO review](#) of measures to reduce equality gaps in employment and employability (Ramaiah and Robinson, 2022); (ii) the TASO [briefing note](#) on sandwich courses (TASO, 2022); (iii) our knowledge of the extant literature in this area; and (iv) the data collected from students and staff in the first phase of the project, outlined above.

The Theory of Change mapped out:

- The evidence base for delivering sandwich courses and placements within HE;
- The intermediate and long-term expected outcomes and relevant indicators (drawing on TASO's evaluation framework and outcomes);
- The change mechanisms for understanding the barriers to participation in sandwich courses and placements, particularly those faced by disadvantaged and underrepresented groups; and
- The potential solutions for addressing these barriers.

A further strength of the Theory of Change approach is that evaluation and review are fundamental to its development (Mason and Barnes, 2007). The Theory of Change constructed in this phase of the project informed the material presented to students in the user testing phase (Phase Three of the project discussed below) and was subsequently revised following the Phase Three interviews, based on the students' responses to the solutions (to challenges to participation) presented to them.

### *3.3.3 Phase Three. User testing*

As noted above, the third phase of the research focussed on gaining feedback from WP students on the Theory of Change developed in Phase Two, through a series of semi-structured interviews. A simplified version of the Theory of Change was developed to show to students ([see Appendix 3](#)), and a short explainer video was produced to explain the content for the Theory of Change. Participants were asked to read the Theory of Change and watch the video prior to the interview. In addition, a semi-structured interview schedule was devised to ask students about key elements of the Theory of Change (see [Appendix 4](#)). Interviewees were asked for their views about the activities specified in the Theory of Change and whether they thought that any of them would have affected their decision about taking a sandwich course and/or their experiences before, during or after their sandwich course (if they had taken one). They were also asked: how they would prioritise the various activities; whether they thought

any of the activities would have an adverse impact; and whether they would suggest adding any other activities to the Theory of Change.

Twenty WP students were recruited to participate in this phase of the project, from four HEPs. Half of the sample had been involved in Phase One (from HEPs 2 and 4), and half had not been interviewed previously (from HEPs 3 and 10, although staff members from both HEPs had been interviewed). Students interviewed in Phase One were emailed directly by the research team to ask if they would like to participate in a second interview. Students who had not been previously involved were recruited via an email sent out by the placement offices of the sampled HEPs.

As in Phase One, the sample was selected to secure, as much as was possible, diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, subject of study, WP category and attitude to placements. The overall sample comprised both Level 5 and Level 6 students. [Table 5](#) and [Table 6](#) provide a summary of student characteristics (students from HEPs 2 and 4 were assigned the same number as they were in Phase One). The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. They were recorded and an automatic transcript was generated. To minimise interviewer effects, those students who had already been interviewed in Phase One were interviewed by a different member of the research team in Phase Three (Leonard, 2003). This approach was designed to ensure the same level of detail was provided by students, rather than them assuming the interviewer already knew their response from the first interview. As in Phase One, all student interviewees were given a £25 voucher to compensate them for their time.

*Table 5. Sample of students interviewed in Phase Three*

Student	Gender	HEP	Degree subject	Level of study	WP category	Placement status
Student 1	Non-binary	HEP 2	Psychology	5	Disability	Not considering sandwich course
Student 2	F	HEP 2	Biological Sciences	5	First generation; disability	No longer considering sandwich course
Student 5	F	HEP 4	Economics	5	First generation; underrepresented ethnic group	Considering sandwich course
Student 6	F	HEP 2	Nutrition and Dietetics	5	Low-income family; underrepresented ethnic group	Considering sandwich course
Student 7	F	HEP 2	Veterinary Medicine	5	Disability	Considering sandwich course
Student 10	M	HEP 2	International Business	6	Low-income family	Completed sandwich course

Student 11	F	HEP 2	Nutrition and Dietetics	6	Underrepresented ethnic group; low-income family; disability	Completed sandwich course
Student 13	F	HEP 4	Marketing Management	6	Mature student; underrepresented ethnic group	Completed sandwich course
Student 16	F	HEP 2	Psychology	6	First generation; low-income family; disability	Did not take sandwich course
Student 21	F	HEP 3	History & English Literature	6	Underrepresented ethnic group	Completed sandwich course
Student 22	M	HEP 3	Business Management	6	Low-income family; underrepresented ethnic group	Completed sandwich course
Student 23	F	HEP 3	Psychology	5	Underrepresented ethnic group	Considering sandwich course
Student 24	F	HEP 3	Law	5	Low-income family	Considering sandwich course
Student 25	F	HEP 3	Law	6	Low-income family; underrepresented ethnic group	Considering sandwich course
Student 26	F	HEP 3	Pharmacy	5	Mature student; underrepresented ethnic group	Considering sandwich course
Student 27	F	HEP 3	Law	6	Underrepresented ethnic group	Completed sandwich course
Student 28	F	HEP 10	Biomedical Sciences	6	Underrepresented ethnic group	Completed sandwich course
Student 29	M	HEP 10	Law	6	Mature student	Did not take sandwich course
Student 30	F	HEP 10	Biomedical Sciences	5	Disability	Considering sandwich course
Student 31	F	HEP 10	Religious Studies	5	Mature student; underrepresented ethnic group	Not considering sandwich course

NB Students 1-16 were additionally interviewed during Phase One. Students 21-31 were interviewed only in Phase Three.

*Table 6. Achieved sample of students in Phase Three*

Number of students (all with WP background)	
In Level 5, not considering a sandwich course	3
In Level 5, considering a sandwich course	8
In Level 6, having completed a sandwich course	7

In Level 6, having not completed a sandwich course	2
TOTAL	20

### 3.3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was secured from the University of Surrey prior to the commencement of the research, and all stages of the project followed relevant professional guidelines alongside those of the University of Surrey.

To ensure that student and HEP participants understood the likely nature of their involvement, the purpose of the research, the methods to be used and the possible uses of the findings were made clear in a detailed project information sheet that all volunteers were sent. Participants signed an informed consent form prior to the start of the interview and were given the contact details of the researchers in case they had any questions before or after the interviews.

Participants' details were held in confidence, and the research team followed appropriate ethical and legal practices in relation to all study procedures. Personal data (name and contact details) were being handled in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation. All information supplied by the participants was stored securely in password-protected computer files, and identifying information shared only amongst the project team. As noted above, reference numbers are used for both HEPs and individual students to ensure no individuals can be identified.

### 3.4 Data analysis methods

Following each interview with a staff member or a student, in both Phases One and Three, the relevant researcher made notes of key points from the interview, using an analytical grid. Separate grids were developed (in Microsoft Word) for Phases One (exploratory phase) and Three (user testing phase) of the research and were based closely on the relevant interview schedule.

Based on these analytical notes and the transcripts of each interview (also stored in Microsoft Word), a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) was undertaken. This comprised the following stages:

- Data familiarisation (reading through the transcripts and analytical notes);



- Code generation (based on extant literature, the project's research questions and previously unanticipated issues arising from the data);
- Identification and review of potential themes;
- Definition and specification of themes; and
- Writing up of the themes, with reference to relevant data.

In addition, the analytical grid was used to explore any differences in response by, for example, institution, discipline of study, and social characteristics. In Phase One, responses from staff were also compared with those from students.

Although most of the analysis was conducted by a single team member, the themes were – at several stages of the analysis – discussed and agreed with the other team members and those who had conducted the interviews with staff and students.

During the analysis, common themes across the dataset were identified. However, themes raised by only one group of interviewees (e.g., students with a disability) were also included – on the basis that they still provide useful insights into the experiences of groups of WP students. Similarly, on the grounds that different institutional contexts can have a significant influence on how students are (or are not) supported, themes were included that were not necessarily raised by many staff interviewees. It was judged that these may still be relevant to that HEP (e.g., a small provider that has only recently started to offer sandwich courses). The themes have been used to structure the findings in [Section 4](#), below.

### 3.5 Rigour of approach

To ensure that a rigorous approach was taken to data collection and analysis, four main approaches were adopted.

- First, as three research team members conducted interviews, we ensured that all were taking the same approach by talking through the interview schedule in some detail before data collection commenced (Milford et al. 2017). The researchers then observed some interviews conducted by other team members (either by sitting in an interview, or by watching the recording once it had finished).
- Second, as noted above, the students from HEP 2 and HEP 4 who were interviewed twice during the project (nine individuals) were not interviewed by the same interviewer. This increased the likelihood that interactions would be similar

across all 20 interviews in Phase Three – in the sense that no rapport would have been established with any interviewee before the interview and that, in the case of the students who were interviewed twice, the interviewer would not be reading anything into their responses based on what they had said in Phase One.

- Third, the same detailed grid was used by all researchers to record their notes after the interview. This was reviewed regularly to ensure that the same degree of detail was being provided by all team members.
- Finally, during the thematic analysis, although most of the work was done by one particular team member, this researcher regularly sought feedback from the others with respect to the identified themes.

### *3.5.1 Reflection on researcher positioning*

The interviewing was shared among three of the four team members. As the three individuals have different social characteristics (most notably in relation to age, career stage and ethnicity), it is possible that these affected the interactions with students and, thus the data produced. However, as all interviews were video recorded, the researchers were able to watch these, as well as read the transcripts, to judge the extent to which there may have been any interviewer effect. Based on this approach, the research team is confident that interviewer effects were minimal (Leonard 2003), as across the sample, questions were answered in a similar way by all interviewees. Indeed, there were no noticeable differences between the sets of interviews the three researchers conducted. There were some differences between single interviews, e.g., relating to how talkative the interviewee was, but this was the case within a set of interviews as well as across them.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

### **4.1 Phase One. Exploratory qualitative research**

In this section of the report, the results of the interviews that were conducted with staff and students as part of the exploratory phase of the research, Phase One, are discussed. The key findings have been grouped into thematic areas, presented under each sub-section below.

#### *4.1.1 Types of sandwich course available*

The features of sandwich courses offered by HEPs varied, to some extent, across the sample. In general, most sandwich courses were assessed on a pass or fail basis

(rather than affecting the overall degree classification) and were recognised on the student's degree certificate. A minimum length was specified, typically about nine months, although this was shorter in some HEPs - e.g., a minimum of 22 weeks in HEP 10. Some HEPs (such as HEPs 1 and 8) were moving towards more flexibility by including multiple placements (where students spend time in more than one organisation), which together add up to the total minimum time needed, as well as self-employment options and the piloting of an internal placement scheme where study and a part-time placement would be mixed (HEP 8). Although not specifically designed to target WP students, some staff believed such options could be particularly useful in addressing the barriers WP students can face (for example, when students cannot commit to a long placement because of caring and/or work commitments).

Some HEPs drew a distinction between sandwich courses that were technically focussed and required by the student's degree programme (e.g., in health sciences and engineering) and others that were more flexible and did not have any technical requirements. These were usually assessed in different ways, with students on the former having to demonstrate specific technical skills, while those on the latter focused on understanding the work context and a range of more transferable skills. Most of the discussion in the sections below focuses on the flexible, non-technical type of sandwich course, as HEPs typically have more discretion about the nature of these, and students are not *required* to take them as part of their degree programme.

Most HEPs were clear that they did not encourage unpaid sandwich placements and followed the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Service (AGCAS) guidance in this respect. Most stated that they did not advertise any such opportunities, although they did not prevent students taking these up if they were keen to do so (in HEP 6, this could not be in a for-profit organisation, however). HEPs 1 and 8 recognised that requiring placements to be paid can be more problematic in certain types of sectors (such as fashion and gaming). HEPs 4 and 5 required all students considering taking an unpaid placement to have an individual budgeting meeting with a member of staff while in HEP 2, students on unpaid placements were required to spend a minimum of seven months on them, rather than the nine-month minimum that applied to all other placements. HEP 3 offered access to a bursary scheme for students on unpaid placements.

There was variation across the sample in whether sandwich courses had a separate UCAS code or not (this is discussed below, in relation to the promotion of such courses). There was also some variation in where in the institution sandwich course

support was located. While most HEPs in the sample had a central sandwich course team, provision was largely devolved in HEPs 4 and 6.

#### *4.1.2 Trends in student participation in sandwich courses*

##### Quality of data collected by HEPs

Only a small number of interviewees indicated that their HEP regularly collected data about the social characteristics of those taking part in sandwich courses (HEPs 5, 7 and 10). In general, these tended to be older institutions and those with larger and more established sandwich course programmes. Other HEPs reported not collecting any data about those who participate (HEPs 1, 4 and 6), or only about specific variables such as subject of study and fee status (i.e., whether home or international) (HEP 2).

Interviewees at HEPs 1 and 9 noted that, although they did not have a very good information system for sandwich courses, they could request data with respect to variables, but this tended to be done only for specific purposes such as Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) returns. One interviewee (at HEP 2) noted that gathering data in this area was hampered by their institution's very risk-averse position with respect to student data. Interviewees generally agreed that having this information would be useful in the future.

As a result of this patchy approach to data collection, very few participants were able to provide specific statistics about their sandwich course cohorts nor identify, with any accuracy, whether those taking up sandwich courses were representative of the wider student population. There are a small number of exceptions which are discussed further below.

Several interviewees did not have data about the total number of students, irrespective of social and demographic characteristics, who had participated in sandwich courses. This was sometimes because all data was held locally, within schools or departments, and not shared centrally. Indeed, an interviewee from HEP 6 claimed that staff were 'cagey' about sharing such data because, they believed, they did not want to reveal that the number of sandwich course students in their area was low.

##### Perceived patterns in participation and equality gaps

Although, as noted above, many HEPs did not collect systematic and centralised statistics on participation in sandwich courses across the institution, various trends in participation were nevertheless identified by interviewees.

In relation to participation in general, in several HEPs, participation in such courses was reported to have dropped during 2020 and 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. While in HEPs 1, 3, 8 and 9, numbers had subsequently picked up, interviewees from other HEPs noted that numbers had still not returned to pre-pandemic levels (HEPs 2, 4, 10). For example, the interviewee at HEP 10 reported a drop from 9-10% of students ten years ago to 4-5% now. They attributed this to various factors including: institutional change and restructuring, which had led to less support being available for students; the diversification of the student body, resulting in fewer students having the social and cultural capital that is often necessary to set up a work placement; and increasing mental health challenges among students (these are discussed in more detail, in relation to specific barriers, below). Some interviewees thought that COVID-19 had a longer-term impact on students (HEPs, 2, 4, 10), leading to them being less flexible about possible work placement options and having higher expectations of HEP support (HEP 10), for example. Relatedly, HEP 8 reported that although numbers were just about back to pre-pandemic levels, there was more variety in the types of placements being taken. This included more self-employed placements, multi-centred placements and part-time placements mixed with study.

In some cases (HEPs 7, 9), the number of students participating in sandwich courses had increased because of the rolling out of opportunities to departments that had not previously been able to participate and/or a general institutional push to increase the number of students on sandwich courses.

With respect to equality gaps, some of HEPs that did collect data identified gaps in relation to gender (with male students being underrepresented, HEP 5) and fee status (with international students being underrepresented, HEP 2). The most robust system for analysing relevant data appeared to be in HEP 7. This HEP collected data at two specific points: when students expressed an interest in taking a sandwich year, at the start of Level 5, and once the sandwich year had started. It reported that, at both points, there were no differences between those planning to take a sandwich course, those who did take a sandwich course, and the wider year group. This was the case for all variables examined, including disability, ethnic group, low participation neighbourhood, socio-economic status, and parental experience of higher education.

Participants who were not able to draw on relevant statistical data nevertheless believed that there were likely to be some groups of students who were underrepresented on sandwich courses. These included:

- Disabled students (mentioned in HEPs 2, 6, 9, 10);
- Students from low-income families (HEPs 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 10); and
- Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students (HEP 6).

In contrast, the interviewee from HEP 4 believed that the students from their institution who took a placement year were representative of the wider student body. However, it should be noted that only a very small number of students from this HEP take a sandwich course, and the student body is highly diverse. HEPs 3 and 8 made similar comments – judging that the representation of WP students was good, reflecting their high numbers in the general student body.

#### *4.1.3 Promotion of sandwich course opportunities*

All the HEPs involved in the research took steps to advertise sandwich courses while students were making their higher education choices (typically at the start of their final year at school or college), and then once they arrived at the HEP. The methods used to publicise the sandwich courses during the initial decision-making phase focussed almost entirely on standard marketing approaches, such as open days (e.g., a stand in a central fair, a slide in department-specific talks), prospectuses and HEP webpages. The interviewee from HEP 7 thought that activities prior to students making their initial degree programme decisions (when up to five choices can be listed on the UCAS form) had quite a limited impact. Nevertheless, they believed they could be more influential when students were deciding which of their five initial choices would become their first and second preferences (i.e., their firm and insurance choices). For this reason, the sandwich course was often promoted heavily in their institution during post-offer visit days.

There was a difference of opinion about whether it was helpful for sandwich courses to have a separate UCAS code. The HEP 10 interviewee, for example, thought it was beneficial by drawing prospective applicants' attention to the possibility of taking a sandwich course. Others felt that it had little influence on students' decisions and could sometimes have a negative effect by making it seem harder than it was for students on other degree programmes to 'opt into' sandwich courses once they had embarked on their studies (e.g., HEP 4).

Once students arrived at the HEP, various approaches were used to inform them about the opportunity to take a sandwich course. These typically included: stalls at centrally run freshers' fairs and matriculation events; advertising by course leaders during induction events; emails to all students; posters; information in the careers service; and lecture 'shout outs'. Several HEPs invited employers into the institution to talk about the opportunities available. For example, NHS staff came into HEP 4, as a quarter of their placements were with the NHS.

Several interviewees mentioned the importance of encouraging students to think about sandwich courses as early as possible in their course, and during Level 4 (usually the first year of an undergraduate programme). Some HEPs had taken specific action to move their support and sandwich course promotion activities into Level 4 (e.g., HEP 5), while others hoped to do so in the future (HEPs 2 and 6). This was thought to be important for all students, to give them as long as possible to think about their options, but was believed, by some interviewees, to be particularly important for WP students as they were thought to be less likely to have considered the option previously (see discussion below), and because they may need longer to gain suitable experience to help them gain a work placement (again, see below for further details). HEP 3 noted that their placements team worked with academics on curriculum design to integrate information about placements and their benefits in employability-focussed aspects of degree programmes.

#### *4.1.4 Students' decision-making processes*

##### Awareness of sandwich courses

In general, there were few differences between the students in the sample with respect to their higher education decision-making. Nearly all explained that they had chosen their specific degree course either for vocational reasons (e.g., because they wanted to be a vet or lawyer), or because of their love of a particular subject (mentioned, for example, in relation to biology, science in general, and economics). In this respect, there were no notable differences between the students with a WP background and those without. Reflecting some of the observations of the staff interviewees discussed above, no students indicated that their choice of subject or course had been directly influenced by whether a sandwich course was available. Indeed, relatively few of those interviewed had given much consideration to taking a sandwich course while they were still at school or college. Those who *had* been aware of the possibility had gained this

information through open day talks at HEPs and, in one case, through the intervention of a careers adviser. Indeed, Student 18 (HEP 4, L6, WP, NSC)<sup>1</sup> explained:

*“in college, we had like a lesson where you can talk to like the ... career advisers. So they were telling us that you can go to like a placement courses ... and also people are more inclined to hire you because like it's one year and everything ....”*

Once they had embarked on their degree course, students typically developed a better sense of what it would be like to take a placement year, and this helped their decision-making processes.

#### Sources of information

When asked specifically about the sources of information they had used to find out about sandwich courses, a similar range of sources was identified by both students who had taken a sandwich course (or were seriously considering doing so) and those who had decided against it. The most cited source was the HEP website, and various other, more specific sources of information available online, such as dedicated sandwich courses or employability webpages or portals. The most useful source, however, was typically thought to be higher education tutors, either those with responsibility for sandwich courses, particularly, or those that had a wider academic purview. The following quotations are illustrative:

*“I think definitely help from my tutors has been quite good. They've definitely encouraged me to go and do it.”* Student 9 (HEP 2, L5, NWP, SC)

*“The main person I go to is my lecturer who sends us the information about it. So if I have any questions or need anything then I would go to her about it...my lecturer that's in charge of placements. I can go to my personal tutor as well, but he's not in charge of placements.”* Student 6 (HEP 2, L5, WP, SC)

Interestingly, other people who provided advice and/or information about sandwich courses were cited only by those who ended up not taking such a year. Student 4 (HEP 2, L5, NWP, NSC) and Student 1 (HEP 2, L5, WP, NSC) mentioned learning about

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<sup>1</sup> The reference in parentheses refers to the HEP the student attend (HEP 2 or HEP 4); whether they are studying at Level 5 (L5) Level 6 (L6); whether they have a widening participation background (WP) or not (NWP); and whether they have taken or are considering a sandwich course (SC) or not (NSC).



sandwich courses from family and friends, while only Student 18 (HEP 4, L6, WP, NSC) indicated that they had furthered their knowledge of sandwich courses through speaking to a student who had already taken one. Other sources, mentioned by one student each, included HEP prospectuses and employability/CV-writing workshops.

#### Key factors affecting a decision to take a sandwich course

For those who were still seriously considering taking a sandwich course at the time of the interview, or who had already completed one. The majority reported that the most important factor influencing their decision was the employment advantages that were believed to follow completion of such a course. This was mentioned by students from WP and non-WP backgrounds and at both the HEPs in the sample, for example:

*“If there was a law firm that had two applicants and I was one of them, and I had done a year in sort of a law firm and the other one had done maybe three weeks, I think that could just ever so slightly tip it my way.”* Student 9 (HEP 2, L5, NWP, SC)

Two other key factors were identified by participants: first, the ability to complete the work placement close to home (either their parental home, or their home near the HEP, if the two were different), without a need to relocate or commute a long distance; and, second, that funding was available in the form of student loans, funding that would not be available if work experience was undertaken *after* the completion of a degree programme.

Students who had decided not to take a sandwich course, or who claimed they were very likely not to do so, cited a wider range of factors. The most common, however, was the desire not to interrupt their studies, and to complete their degree in the fastest time possible. This was mentioned by several students, but only those from a WP background.

*“... I'd rather do it after my 3rd year and just get all the education part out of the way first... makes more sense in my brain ... I feel like if I went on a placement, I would enjoy earning money too much to then switch back to spending a year not earning money ....”* Student 1 (HEP 2, L5, WP, NSC)

*“I was reluctant to think about doing a placement as well because I just at this point I kind of want to get the degree done and then... I think it was the amount of time that I've taken out because I don't know, I feel ... like I want to get it through this bit and then worry about work experience and things like that afterwards.”* Student 2 (HEP 2, L5, WP, NSC)

*“And I think my biggest concern is disrupting the flow of the course, losing touch a bit with the clinical skills and the knowledge and stuff, and then having to return to it.”* Student 7 (HEP 2, L5, WP, SC)

Other factors, each discussed by one or two interviewees included:

- The geographical distance of possible work placements: Student 19 (HEP 2, L6, NWP, NSC); Student 16 (HEP 2, L6, WP, NSC)
- The unpaid nature of the placements that were available: Student 19 (HEP 2, L6, NWP, NSC)
- The mental health challenges that they were experiencing at the time: Student 16 (HEP 2, L6, WP, NSC)
- The early deadlines for most placements: Student 18 (HEP 4, L6, WP, NSC).

#### *4.1.5 Barriers – to taking and/or succeeding on a placement*

Staff perceptions of barriers for students

Despite typically not being able to refer to any statistical evidence to support their views, all staff interviewees believed that students from WP backgrounds face considerable barriers in accessing sandwich course provision. Most of the barriers that were identified related to students from low-income backgrounds and/or who were the first in their family to attend HE. These included:

- Not being able to identify with the employers who come to visit, or the students who have already taken a sandwich course (HEPs 3, 6, 8, 10);
- Not having the family connections that can make it easier to secure a work placement (HEPs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9);
- Not having the level of confidence (derived from family background) sometimes needed to be successful at interview (HEPs 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9);
- Being required to make an early decision about accommodation for the following year: when all one's friends are signing rental agreements, it can take

considerable confidence and self-belief (that you will find a work placement) to not do so, and students from lower socio-economic groups may be less likely to have this confidence (HEPs 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10);

- Having limited financial resources to draw upon (HEPs 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10) e.g. to extend a degree programme by an extra year, and so delay entry into the labour market; to be able to afford travel to interviews and/or appropriate work wear; and to take up an unpaid placement, if that is the only option available;
- Being restricted geographically, and thus not being able to relocate to another part of the country for a work placement, because of cost and/or other commitments (HEPs 1, 3, 6, 8, 9);
- Being less likely to have a range of extra-curricular activities on one's CV, to demonstrate experience and to provide examples to talk about at interview (HEPs 4, 6);
- Having limited time, because of paid work commitments, to devote to applying for work placements and attending interviews (HEPs 3, 4, 5, 8);
- Having limited knowledge about graduate employers and how early schemes are advertised, which can mean students sometimes miss deadlines for applications (HEPs 4, 7).

A small number of interviewees also outlined the barriers that could be faced by students with a disability, including: the large amount of written information associated with sandwich courses that can seem very daunting for students with dyslexia; concern about having to disclose a disability to a potential employer; and fear of having to operate, sometimes for the first time, in an environment where there is not necessarily dedicated support for one's disability (HEPs 2, 10).

Barriers facing students with other WP characteristics were much less commonly discussed. However, a few interviewees identified specific barriers for mature students, noting that they are sometimes constrained in the time that they can devote to applications, as well as their ability to relocate for a work placement, because of caring commitments (HEPs 5, 6). With respect to students from BAME backgrounds, one interviewee from HEP 10 claimed that, in their institution, such students were often interested in working abroad (for example, in the countries that their families had migrated from) but institutional support for overseas work placements was not good. HEP 3 also noted that, at their institution, sometimes cultural factors influenced the type of roles and industries the families of female students thought appropriate, which could potentially limit the opportunities available, if not addressed.

Almost all the identified barriers related to students *accessing* sandwich courses, not the barriers they may face while on their work placement.

#### Student perceptions of barriers to accessing sandwich courses

In many ways, the various factors outlined above mapped onto what students themselves perceived to be the main barriers to taking a sandwich course. The responses of students who had decided against taking a sandwich course were similar to those of students who had taken such a year or were seriously considering doing so. However, in this section, their responses are reported separately, given that the influence of the various factors was quite different.

##### (a) Students who had decided against a sandwich course

Students who had not taken a sandwich course or were not still considering doing so identified a number of key barriers. The most frequently cited barrier was the perceived lack of support from the HEP. This was mentioned by students at HEP 2 and HEP 4. The following excerpts are illustrative:

*“I am applying for placements and I don't feel like the university does support me as I would like to as much .... there were no compulsory sessions about placements that I had to attend and you had to go and look yourself on Engage... I feel like in my situation I have to look after myself .... There's lots of students that don't know anything about placement. And lots of students come to me and ask if I if they should be applying yet [as they are a course representative], so I had to go to my course leader myself and tell her to like, make a presentation... It was after like two or three months where I had to go to her and ask her to do it ... I think there should be like a compulsory session where you have to attend.”*  
Student 5 (HEP 4, L5, WP, NSC)

*“I don't think I've really had that good communication or rapport with them [tutor], really. But just like it may [help to have] a little like drop in session occasionally or... So maybe like occasional like emails that are like proactive from the tutor, that's like 'hey, you haven't shown up to the tutor session for a while' would help.”*  
Student 17 (HEP 2, L6, WP, NSC)

While the quotations above focus on the role of tutors specifically, interviewees also felt that HEPs could provide better information about sandwich courses, for example, about the likely duration, level of payment, and typical patterns of work.

Other key barriers included the funding of sandwich courses. Some students felt it was unfair to have to continue to pay fees to the HEP while they were working, and others had been deterred by the fact that the only work placements they believed were open to them were unpaid. This comment was mentioned by a range of students, not only by those from WP backgrounds.

Two students (both from WP backgrounds) spoke of the difficulty they had experienced in coping with rejections from sandwich course providers:

*“I have applied for a few placements. I have been rejected by a few. There was one where I went to the last process. So Step 5 and then they said that they no longer want to continue. So that has made me like demotivated to apply for any more placements, which is really sad because I really wanted to do a placement year...”* Student 5 (HEP 4, L5, WP, NSC)

*“I did apply. There was ... was one in particular that I got to like late stages too and then that just fell out. And then I feel like from that point forwards it was just like, what's the point?”* Student 17 (HEP 2, L6, WP, NSC)

Two students also mentioned being deterred by the perceived need to travel a considerable distance to access a work placement, and one student noted that timing was a problem: by the time they had decided they wanted to do a sandwich course, the deadline for most opportunities had passed.

(b) Students who had taken a sandwich course, or who were seriously considering taking one

As noted above, similar barriers were identified by the students who had either taken a sandwich course, or were seriously considering one; however, a rather wider range of factors was identified by this group. One of the most frequently mentioned barriers was a lack of knowledge about sandwich courses, particularly in relation to fees and loans, what a sandwich course entails, and how to go about finding a suitable work placement (including the considerable amount of time it can take). Moreover, several students

would have welcomed a more proactive approach to support and the provision of information from tutors:

*“Also reminders and guidance on applying by the module tutor.”* Student 13 (HEP 4, L6, WP, SC)

*“That was the only part that was a little bit more difficult, was trying to kind of communicate with him [placement tutor] and get him to respond.”* Student 14 (HEP 2, L6, NWP, SC)

As with the students discussed previously, there was some concern (on the part of both WP and non-WP students) about the cost of taking a sandwich course, not least the expense of travelling to interviews and assessment centres. In addition, and reflecting the comments from HEP staff, some students believed that a key barrier was the requirement that they interrupt their studies to complete a placement.

With respect to specific WP categories, some interviewees felt that mature students, and those with mental health challenges could be supported better:

*“When people would come to my university and talk about their placement experience, I wasn’t seeing anyone that I could relate to. So I was seeing a lot of people who are just like fresh out of A Levels and straight into their placements .... But I didn’t see anyone who maybe took a different career path .... So maybe if I saw a few more people who were like on the same kind of path as me [as a mature student], then I would definitely be like, OK, well it’s possible.”* Student 13 (HEP 4, L6, WP, SC)

*“I had a lot of contact with the disability and neurodiversity team in the beginning, simply because I didn’t have a diagnosed condition. It made it a lot more difficult to get the arrangements that I needed and still figuring that out now.”* Student 11 (HEP 2, L6, WP, SC)

#### Student perceptions of barriers to succeeding on a sandwich course

Throughout the interviews with students, as with the staff interviews, it was notable that the majority of perceived barriers discussed related to *accessing* a sandwich course.

There were very few remarks about the barriers experienced *during* a sandwich course work placement. Indeed, all the students in the sample who had taken a sandwich course were extremely positive about their experience.

Only three barriers were identified. First, three students thought that the HEP tutor assigned to them during their year was relatively disengaged thus providing them with less support than they needed. One participant also indicated that they would have benefitted from getting to know their tutor before the year started.

Second, two interviewees (both from WP backgrounds) thought that they were not as well prepared as they could have been in terms of both the sandwich course in general (e.g., being away from the HEP for a year, knowing what to expect in the workplace) and with respect to their specific role in their placement organisation. Finally, one student commented on the difficulty of coping financially during their placement year:

*“So although my degree placement was paid, it was still kind of having to kind of stump up enough money for the future as well because you don't get as much maintenance loan. So I've got a grant to survive. You get far less when you are on placement when it's paid. So there's a lot of budgeting and considerations towards that. We pay our rent six months in advance for instance, that's quite a lot for students.”* Student 10 (HEP 2, L6, WP, SC)

Reflecting the comment made by one of the staff interviewees (from HEP 6, discussed below), one student, who was not considering a sandwich course, felt that more should be done to support the employability of students who did not want to take a sandwich course, or who were not able to, for whatever reason. Indeed, they felt that at their HEP (HEP 2), students considering sandwich courses were given significantly better support with CV writing and evidencing their skills than their peers.

#### *4.1.6 HEP action to reduce or remove barriers*

Most HEPs had already taken some action to reduce or remove the barriers to sandwich course participation faced by students from WP backgrounds. Such action included:

- Making more use of students from WP backgrounds, who have previously taken a sandwich year, in talks about such opportunities. Staff thought such students could, in this way, act as effective role models (HEPs 4, 9);
- Bringing in employers who themselves share social characteristics with WP students to speak to those interested in sandwich courses (HEP 9);
- Partnering with large employers that are committed to social mobility (HEP 9);
- Offering a bursary for expenses incurred while on a sandwich course, or when applying for one (HEPs 2, 3, 5, 7, 9);
- Not advertising unpaid placements. This was common in most of the HEPs, but was mentioned as a specific action to help WP students in HEPs 1 and 5;
- Requiring all students considering an unpaid or low-paid placement to attend a one-to-one budgeting meeting to ensure they would be able to cope financially (HEPs 4 and 5);
- Shortening the minimum duration of unpaid placements to enable students to combine this more easily with paid work (HEP 2);
- Running schemes for WP students that focus on employability in general, rather than sandwich courses specifically. It was thought that these often had a positive influence in giving WP students the skills, knowledge and confidence to apply for a sandwich placement (HEPs 4, 7, 10). In HEP 10, this included support for WP students to gain part-time work to bolster their CVs for placements and/or employment on graduation;
- Conducting 'bootcamps' focussing on work placements (for a sandwich course) and graduate employment. HEP 10 run a bootcamp specifically for WP students, consisting of a weekend spent in a group of about 30 working on 'confidence and personal transformation', with the input of external consultants;
- Working closely with the HEP neurodiversity team to improve the support available to students with a disability (HEP 2) and running specialist workshops for all disabled students, focussing on the importance of disclosure to employers (HEP 7).

Interestingly, an interviewee from HEP 6 believed that it was impossible to remove all barriers to participation and suggested that, instead, HEPs should be working to ensure that the benefits that accrue from a sandwich course can be realised from a three- or four-year degree programme that does not include a year of work experience. They were thus developing an initiative to include the following in all degree programmes across the HEP: short experiences with employers; problem-solving sessions with and/or for employers; and other forms of experiential learning (such as Level 6 students



running consultancy projects and advice clinics). Although they believed that some of these may encourage more students to take sandwich courses, the aim was to make the advantages of a sandwich course available to those who were unable to take one.

#### *4.1.7 Impact of taking a sandwich course*

##### Staff perceptions

There was a strong consensus across the sample of HEP staff that taking a sandwich course had a positive influence on students' subsequent employment, both in terms of finding a job, and the job being at graduate-level. Typically, HEPs relied on their analysis of the nationally collected Graduate Outcomes data (HEPs 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10) (although the HEP 10 interviewee noted that this data was often 'very patchy'). HEP 7 reported, for example, that Graduate Outcomes data for their institution indicated that those who had taken a sandwich course were on average 7% more likely to be in a graduate job when compared to other students on the same degree programme in the institution. Similarly, analysis of Graduate Outcomes data conducted by HEP 5 indicated that students who took a sandwich course were 10.9% more likely than the average HEP 5 student to have secured a graduate role and 23.7% more likely than HEP 5 students with no work experience. It is important to note, however, that these figures were recalled by interviewees as part of the qualitative research; this study has not accessed or analysed statistical data on graduate outcomes.

Furthermore, the statistics mentioned by interviewees refer only to correlations, and do not say anything about whether participating in a sandwich course causes a change in graduate outcomes. Indeed, several interviewees themselves commented that, while they personally believed that sandwich courses had a very positive impact on subsequent employment, it is possible that those who take up such work placements are the kind of proactive students who would find it relatively easy to secure employment anyway (e.g., HEP 9).

A small number of institutions conducted research of their own, such as surveys at the end of the sandwich course and/or including questions about sandwich courses in questionnaires sent to all final-year students (HEPs 2, 4, 9, 10). However, limitations with such sources were noted. For example, the interviewee from HEP 4 explained that they used a questionnaire that asked students to rate their skills prior to and after a sandwich course, to establish the degree of change. However, as students tended to rate themselves very highly at the start, it had proved very difficult to establish whether

any change had occurred. HEP 8 hoped to be able to conduct more analysis on this in the future and saw the value of doing so.

### Student perceptions

All students, irrespective of whether they had taken a sandwich course, were still considering the option, or had decided against it, held a common view that such opportunities had a very positive influence on subsequent employment (this was the case even for students who had taken a sandwich course but had yet to secure a job for when they left university). The main reasons given for holding this view were that sandwich courses:

- Enable students to gain relevant skills and experience;
- Enable students to develop good employment-related connections and networks;
- Facilitate a better understanding of the world of work, and what employers are looking for;
- Can lead directly to employment in the placement organisation (this was the case for two of the students in the sample);
- Provide access to relevant training and development opportunities, via the employing organisation;
- Give students 'an edge' over other students when applying for jobs post-graduation.

It is thus notable that no students doubted the value of sandwich courses on their future employment, even those who ultimately decided not to pursue a sandwich course.

## 4.2 Phase Two -development of a Theory of Change

The findings from Phase One, outlined above, fed into the development of a Theory of Change in Phase Two (along with the other sources of data mentioned in [Section 3.3.2](#) above). The Theory of Change is split into inputs, activities, outcomes, impacts and the underlying change mechanisms that map the causal pathways to change. The 'activities' section synthesises the insight gained from interviews with students and staff and is comprised of four main areas:

1. Data collection, access and use: including the processes required to ensure that data on the student journey through a sandwich course is accurately recorded and made available for evaluation and analysis;

2. Policy development: including the policies HEPs can implement to encourage flexible sandwich course formats, and financial responsibility (in terms of both providing financial support to students, and developing students' own financial awareness);
3. Information sharing: including ensuring that information is made available early; is provided in accessible formats; and that information on sandwich courses is more closely integrated with degree programmes;
4. Support: including support provided in the periods of time before a decision is made; before a sandwich placement commences; during the sandwich year; and once it has been completed.

The shortened version of the Theory of Change that was shared with students in the user testing phase of the project is available in [Appendix 3](#). Please note that as this user testing phase was focused on WP students, the shortened version of the Theory of Change did not include the first category of activities, that of data collection, access, and use. Students were not able to comment on what data had been collected or used, so this section was omitted. The other three areas of activity were included in the user testing and provided valuable insights, as demonstrated in the sections below.

### **4.3 Phase Three. User testing**

All 20 WP students interviewed in Phase Three of the project were positive about the variety of activities listed in the Theory of Change, and very few students thought that any of the activities would be counterproductive in terms of WP students accessing and/or succeeding on placements. The section below reports feedback on specific aspects of the Theory of Change and priority areas identified by participants, before outlining some additional suggestions that emerged from the student interviews, and how this data was used to revise the Theory of Change model.

#### *4.3.1 Feedback on specific aspects of the Theory of Change*

##### Policy development

Students were typically positive about the various activities included within the 'policy development' part of the Theory of Change, including the policies HEPs can implement to encourage flexible sandwich course formats, and policies related to financial

responsibility (in terms of both providing financial support to students, and developing students' financial awareness).

Indeed, many interviewees were enthusiastic about the flexible formats of placement outlined in the Theory of Change. For example, Student 31 (HEP 10) said that if part-time and/or shorter placements had been offered at their HEP, they would have considered taking a placement, as this would have enabled them to continue with their part-time work, which was essential to them as mature students. Multi-centred placements were also seen as valuable as they could provide insight into several different types of organisations. In addition, internal (to the HEP) placements were viewed as important, particularly for widening the choice of offering, and potentially being easier to arrange than other types of opportunity. Similarly, students believed that local placements would help to reduce the costs of taking a sandwich year and be 'safe', because they would be able to return to the parental home easily if problems occurred (e.g., Student 30, HEP 10; Student 24, HEP 3; Student 23, HEP 3; Student 31, HEP 10; Student 7, HEP 2).

While many students were positive about HEPs offering shorter and/or multi-centred placements, three students thought that such options might be problematic as they would not enable students to build the detailed understanding of the work context that would be possible over the course of a year, or to have enough time to develop the skills and experience necessary to perform at a high level (Student 10, HEP 2; Student 11, HEP 2; Student 29, HEP 10). Student 11 had experienced a two-centred placement as this was compulsory on their course but reflected that "it takes time to find your norm", so any shorter amount of time spent on placement would not have worked well. Another student expressed concerns about the difficulty, for disabled students, transferring information about reasonable adjustments to multiple workplaces (Student 7, HEP 2).

Financial factors were very important to many of the students interviewed, and nearly all were extremely positive about the suggestion of offering budgeting advice to those going on placement, either individually or in a group. Some participants noted that they had found issues related to tax and National Insurance confusing, and so it would have been useful to have these explained, along with advice about how to manage a limited budget (e.g., Student 27, HEP 3; Student 29, HEP 10; Student 28, HEP 10). Students were also strongly in favour of bursaries being offered to WP students. For example, Student 26 (HEP 3) commented that:

*“As a mature student, I cut a tight corner ... without financial support people tend to lose interest, so this will go a long way, put people in a better mental health position.”*

Students were supportive of the suggestion that HEPs liaise with employers to reduce the costs associated with the application process (conducting interviews online, for example) and with private landlords to try to coordinate their deadlines for rental deposit with placement timelines.

There was less consensus amongst participants about whether HEPs should only offer paid placements, or whether unpaid placements should be allowed in certain circumstances, such as when a student is eager to work with a charity that has limited funds. While all students acknowledged the problems associated with taking on an unpaid placement (many noting that these had become particularly acute in the current cost of living crisis), several interviewees also believed that students should not be prevented from taking up unpaid placements if they are the only means of getting into a particular area of work, or the only type that is available locally (e.g., Student 5, HEP 4; Student 22, HEP 3; Student 29, HEP 10; Student 23, HEP 3).

In addition, while some students thought it would be useful for HEPs to improve flexibility around the provision of accommodation (e.g., offering guaranteed campus accommodation for students returning from placement), this view was not shared by all. Indeed, several students (e.g., Student 7, HEP 2; Student 21, HEP 3; Student 10, HEP 2) said that they had not been – or would not be – interested in returning to live on campus, and that it was probably more useful to act with respect to the private rented sector (as outlined above).

#### Information sharing

Similarly positive comments were made about the various activities included in the ‘information sharing’ part of the Theory of Change, which include ensuring that information is made available early and is provided in accessible formats; and that information on sandwich courses is more closely integrated with degree programmes.

The importance of making information about sandwich years available at an early point in a degree programme was emphasised by the majority of students. Many thought that using open days to highlight the possibility of taking a sandwich course would be useful, and nearly all students contended that providing detailed information during the first year of study was essential. Indeed, many interviewees believed that if the information was not given until the second year, students could miss out on various opportunities,

particularly those with organisations with early application deadlines. Providing information during induction was seen as less useful, as students stated there was so much to take in at this point, and sandwich course information could thus easily get forgotten and/or overlooked.

Visits from existing students who were currently on placement were generally seen as very positive: to help motivate students (Student 30, HEP 10), to make sandwich courses seem more ‘relatable’ (Student 31, HEP 10) and less nerve-wracking (Student 24, HEP 10); and to provide answers to quite specific questions (Student 21, HEP 3).

Similarly, students were supportive of the various activities suggested to make information more accessible. Students with disabilities believed that close liaison with the HEP disabilities team would help. Student 7 (HEP 2), for example, commented that having more involvement from the disabilities team would reduce the stress of planning and starting a placement, particularly if information about reasonable adjustments could be transferred to the placement organisation rather than having to start from scratch: “you would feel reassured that the provision would be appropriate.”

As part of the information offered by the HEP, providing examples of students from WP backgrounds who had successfully taken a sandwich year (and could thus act as effective role models) was also viewed favourably. These quotations are illustrative:

*“This resonates with me because I didn’t meet anyone from my background, and not seeing someone has had an impact, I started to doubt this can be maintained as a stable career. It made me feel isolated....”* (Student 31, HEP 10)

*“It is good because we do think about things like ‘Am I represented here?’ So in this way, people will feel encouraged ... listening to others from a similar background will make it easier to make a decision.”* (Student 25, HEP 3)

Access to information from trusted sources and familiar tutors was also thought to be important. Although several students noted that familiarity with tutors was less important than having access to an individual who was knowledgeable about placements and who was able to establish a good relationship with the student. Irrespective of which member of staff was providing the sandwich course advice, all students felt it important that regular updates and training were provided to these individuals, so that the information they pass on to students is accurate and timely.

Students’ views about whether it would be helpful for sandwich courses to be fully integrated with degree programmes were more mixed. One of the strongest supporters of this idea was Student 5 (HEP 4), who thought it would be very helpful to cover

placement information as part of a compulsory module. They believed such a module, which could cover CV writing and how to go about applying for placements, “would help those students who have relatively little free time outside class” for these activities. Nevertheless, some reservations were expressed about integrating a sandwich year more closely with a student’s degree programme, and a few interviewees felt that the two should be kept separate (e.g., Student 21, HEP 3). The students with such views were typically on degree programmes where placements were already quite closely tied to their course of study and were seen as overly restrictive when students were interested in employment in areas not necessarily related to their degree (e.g., Student 11, HEP 2).

#### Support (before, during and after placement)

There was a high degree of consensus, across the sample, that increased support at various points in the process of deciding about and then undertaking a sandwich year would be highly beneficial. One-to-one meetings at an early point in the process, when students are making decisions about their options, were considered useful to “give confidence” (Student 30, HEP 10); “provide tailored advice” (Student 21, HEP 3); “give a better sense of what you are letting yourself in for” (Student 6, HEP 3); “help students navigate the process better, and give them encouragement and support” (Student 5, HEP 4). The suggested involvement of wider university teams (e.g., disability and neurodiversity, careers, finance) during the decision-making process was also considered useful by most students.

Nearly all students also thought that providing support before the sandwich year starts (but after a decision has been taken to go) would be very helpful. Student 7 (HEP 2) speculated that, as someone with a disability, it is “probably quite overwhelming to start a placement”, and so building a relationship with a placement tutor before the year starts would help assuage nerves; they would be a good person to whom to ask questions. Meeting other students who will be taking a sandwich year was also commented on favourably by many students. Student 30 (HEP 10) believed that this was the most important form of support: to “start interacting so a community is built.” Student 24 (HEP 3) also noted the value of talking to people “in the same boat,” experiencing the same nervousness. Clarity about what HEP resources would be available to students on a sandwich year was also thought to be important. As well as academic resources, the careers service and mental health support were both mentioned (e.g., Student 5, HEP 4; Student 28, HEP 10; Student 25, HEP 3; Student 13, HEP 4).

The various forms of sandwich year support specified in the Theory of Change were all viewed positively by students. Clear information about the work role, the role of the visiting tutor and the required assessment, as well as the provision of support for when problems arise, were thought to be particularly important. For example, Student 31 (HEP 10) was typical in explaining that it was critical to know that support would be available in the case of any difficulties: this “will make me less stressed and not isolated.” With respect to clarity about the work role, Student 21 (HEP 3) thought this was very important, “as students overextend themselves to please”; being clearer about what is expected of them may help to avoid this.

Finally, support after the placement was also considered essential by the majority of students. Several students had concerns about fitting back into university life after having taken a sandwich year – both socially and academically. They believed the various activities specified in the Theory of Change, particularly the contact with a tutor and fellow placement students, and the tailored academic skills sessions, would all be beneficial. The following comments capture the sentiments shared:

*“Having the support of other students when you return would be very useful ... you could offer each other support and know you are not alone.”* (Student 7, HEP 2)

*“[Academic skills sessions would be] good because if you are coming back after a year there is a gap in knowledge and it can be daunting going to labs and lectures again. It would be good to have a refresher from the second year.”* (Student 28, HEP 10)

*“[Academic skills training] is important as it will help refocus your academic skills because the final year is most important in terms of your percentage.”* (Student 25, HEP 3)

One student explained that, although they had been invited to some academic skills sessions at the start of their final year, these were induction sessions for first year students, and thus not appropriate to them. They stressed that such sessions needed to be tailored to those returning from a sandwich year; this would also help develop networks with other returners (Student 10, HEP 2).

#### 4.3.2 Priority areas

Reflecting the comments reported above, many different areas of the Theory of Change were identified when students were asked which they would want HEPs to prioritise.



While several students believed that early and accessible information sharing was a priority, others held the view that ensuring financial support during the year was the most important factor, and others highlighted the key role played by support – before, during and/or after a placement. Overall, there was relatively little consensus from the students about which activities HEPs should prioritise, but a general view, shared by all, that most of the specified activities would be very useful.

#### *4.3.3 Additional suggestions*

Participants were asked if there was anything that they believed was missing from the Theory of Change, which would have a significant impact on accessing sandwich course and/or succeeding on them for students from WP backgrounds. Half of the students interviewed suggested specific activities that could be added to the Theory of Change. These were typically related to one of the three areas already reflected in the Theory of Change.

##### Placement offering

- Specific placements for WP students. Student 30 (HEP 10) thought that this might be an effective means of avoiding discrimination for students from underrepresented ethnic groups (in terms of not having to compete against white students).
- Online, virtual work placements. One student (Student 24, HEP 3) had some limited experience of this, and thought it could be more widely available to enable access to sandwich years for students who find it difficult to attend a workplace, physically, on a regular basis and/or relocate for a sandwich year.
- Wider range of opportunities, not limited to specific degree programmes. Some students spoke about how the options they were offered were closely related to their specific degree programme but how they would have been eager to take up a placement in another type of work environment. They would be keen to be able to access the opportunities offered to students from other disciplines (e.g., Student 11, HEP 2).

##### Information sharing

- Easier to access information about possible work placements. Student 5 (HEP 4) spoke about how, while at their HEP there was a central placement website, this was not comprehensive in its coverage, and opportunities were often emailed

around instead, which made it difficult to keep track of options. They suggested that each HEP have a single place where all opportunities are publicised.

- More information about placement organisations. It was suggested that this could be made available through ‘insider days’, to enable students to visit an organisation, to learn about its culture before applying (Student 21, HEP 3), and better ‘on-boarding’ sessions, at the very start of a sandwich year (Student 28, HEP 10). Student 28 explained that they had initially been very worried about having to spend so much of their time in meetings, but an on-boarding session on organisational culture and time management helped assuage their fears and outlined the support that would be available.
- Networking. Some students believed that more contact with other WP students, during the decision-making process, would have been useful (Student 26, HEP 3), as would have networking with a wider group of contacts, including those who could potentially act as mentors (Student 25, HEP 3).

### Support

- Continuity of support. Having the same tutor before, during and after the sandwich year was deemed important. Tutors who already knew a student well were thought to be able to provide a better level of support during the sandwich year (Student 13, HEP 4), and to be able to help students reintegrate with their fellow students on return to the university for their final year (Student 10, HEP 2).
- More specific support for neurodiverse students and those with disabilities. For relevant WP students, one-to-one sessions were suggested, along with liaison with employers regarding preparation for, and adjustments during, the sandwich year. One student reported having good support on this from the disability team (with respect to their academic studies and housing needs) before and after their sandwich year but not during it (Student 11, HEP 2).
- Advice on how to maximise the advantages of sandwich years. Interviewees suggested that it would be useful if the careers service provided advice about how to make the most of opportunities, during the sandwich year, to develop the competencies that employers typically look for, and encouraged students to record their experiences fully. Indeed, one student thought they would have benefitted from advice to keep better notes about the work-related competencies they were developing during their sandwich year (Student 13, HEP 4).

#### 4.3.4 Revisions to the Theory of Change

The positive response of interviewees to the original Theory of Change suggests that most of the activities specified within it are useful and should therefore be retained. Moreover, the data indicates that the original suppositions about the links between inputs, activities, outcomes, and impacts are shared by most of the participants included in the user testing.

As very few students believed that any of the proposed activities would be counter-productive, and most of the proposed activities were seen as ‘key priorities’ by some students at least, very little material was taken out of the original Theory of Change. The only activity that has been omitted from the final version (see [Appendix 5](#)) is ‘Session as part of induction’. As noted above, providing information during induction was seen as less useful, as students contended that there was so much to take in at this point, that sandwich course information could easily get forgotten and/or overlooked.

Some additional activities have been added to the Theory of Change following the user testing with students and informed by their additional suggestions noted above. The final, revised version of the Theory of Change diagram is provided in [Appendix 5](#), and the full Enhanced Theory of Change with Supporting Narrative, [can be found here](#).

#### 4.4 Unexpected outcomes

The main unexpected outcome from the project is the poor quality of institutional data recorded by HEPs, relating to sandwich courses. This is surprising given the strong focus on data in many other parts of the higher education sector, and in other activities pursued by HEPs. The lack of data on labour market outcomes is particularly surprising given that one of the main aims of sandwich courses is to enhance employability.

#### 5. Limitations

The poor quality of institutional data collected by HEPs, as discussed above, constitutes a key limitation of the study. While the staff perceptions about equality gaps are indicative and interesting, we know that humans are susceptible to bias, and their estimations are not always accurate. Thus, it is hard to determine the objective picture about the size and nature of any equality gaps based on the data collected in this study.

In addition, the user testing was conducted with students only. As a result, this study does not include data about the perceptions of HEP staff of the Theory of Change and proposed activities, and whether they believe it adequately addresses the challenges

they outlined during the Phase One interviews. It may also have been useful to include students from a wider range of HEPs in Phase One, to better reflect some of the diversity of the higher education sector.

These limitations inform the conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for further research outlined below.

## **6. Conclusions**

A key conclusion of the research relates to the collection and use of institutional data. As noted in various parts of the report, such data was not available in some of the HEPs interviewed. In other HEPs, the data was available, but not analysed (or not analysed with respect to WP categories). Without this type of analysis, it is difficult to make an accurate assessment of who is taking up sandwich courses and whether they are representative of the broader student cohort. As a result, it is also difficult to make recommendations about any particular WP groups that should be targeted through specific interventions or other activities. Thus, all HEPs are urged to ensure that robust data with respect to sandwich courses are collected and analysed. This institutional data could be used in conjunction with the Enhanced Theory of Change (published alongside this report) to design the type of experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations that will enable strong conclusions to be drawn about what works for helping students from WP background access and benefit from sandwich courses and work placements.

Based on this project's findings, HEPs could usefully consider offering a greater variety of types of sandwich courses than is currently available in many institutions. This could include, for example, part-time placements, shorter placements, internal (to the HEP) placements, and those that involve spending time with more than one organisation. This variety was typically welcomed by students and thought to overcome some of the problems associated with a more conventional sandwich course model. In rolling out these various options, it will be important for HEPs to assess whether and what kind of part-time placements have better or worse outcomes for students. In addition, HEPs could pay further attention to a range of issues relating to student finances while on a sandwich course, such as: providing budgeting and other financial advice; advertising only paid placements; offering a bursary to WP students; and liaising with employers to reduce the costs associated with the application process.

Moreover, in many HEPs, information about sandwich courses could be provided at an earlier point in students' degree programmes, and in more easily accessible formats.

Many students, for example, would have valued detailed information about sandwich course opportunities relatively early in the first year of their degree, with some believing they had been disadvantaged when information was provided only in their second year of study. Similarly, it was commonly held that the early involvement of the HEP disability team would be very beneficial for students with disabilities. Improvements to the timing and accessibility of sandwich course information was considered the most important set of activities by several student interviewees. HEPs may, therefore, want to prioritise work in this area.

Finally, enhanced support for WP students who are considering a sandwich course, or who have already embarked upon one, would be welcomed by many students. Although current practice in this area differs quite considerably between HEPs, students typically thought that support throughout the sandwich course process could be improved. Individual-level support, when options are initially being considered, was thought to be particularly beneficial, as was establishing trusting relationships with the designated placement tutors. Support after completing a sandwich year would also be welcomed by many students, particularly with respect to: helping them to reflect on the skills and knowledge developed during the year, and how these could be most effectively drawn upon in future job applications; integrating with other students; and ensuring their academic skills were at an appropriate level for entering their final year of study.

## **7. Key learning and recommendations**

Based on the three phases of the research, this study identifies the key challenges, as perceived by staff and students, to WP students accessing, and succeeding on, sandwich courses. These findings informed the Theory of Change development and the conclusions.

### **7.1 Recommendations**

Five main recommendations emerge from this research. A sector-level response is required, to ensure common practice across HEPs, and that WP students are well-supported in their sandwich year choices, whichever institution they attend. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that HEPs operate in different contexts, with different challenges and varying levels of resource available. This may have a significant influence on which actions HEPs choose to prioritise, and which they are able to pursue. Additional detail about the recommendations is provided in the final version of our Theory of Change (see [Appendix 5](#) for a diagrammatic version [and here](#)

for the full, Enhanced Theory of Change with supporting narrative). In taking forward these recommendations, HEPs are encouraged to make use of the Enhanced Theory of Change and build their own Theory of Change, sensitive to their local context.

*Recommendation 1: Improve the collection and use of HEPs' institutional data relating to sandwich courses.*

HEPs should make a concerted effort to collect consistent data on the social characteristics of students accessing sandwich courses, the placements these students attend, and the degree and labour market outcomes associated with attendance. Furthermore, HEPs should routinely monitor the data on sandwich course uptake to assess whether a representative group of the student population is accessing placement opportunities.

*Recommendation 2: Conduct more robust evaluation.*

Following recommendation 1, HEPs should make use of their institutional data and the [Enhanced Theory of Change](#) published alongside this report to design and conduct the type of experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations that allow strong conclusions to be drawn about what works for helping students from WP background access and benefit from sandwich courses and work placements. It will also be important for HEPs to evaluate changes introduced as a result of the other recommendations.

*Recommendation 3: Further develop internal policies on the provision of sandwich courses.*

HEPs should consider offering a greater variety of sandwich courses than is currently available in many institutions, for example, part-time placements, shorter placements, internal (to the HEP) placements, and placements that involve spending time with more than one organisation. Greater variety in the type of sandwich course offered was typically welcomed by students and estimated to overcome some of the challenges associated with a more conventional sandwich course model.

HEPs should also consider implementing specific support on student finances for learners considering a sandwich course. This includes providing budgeting and other financial advice; advertising only paid placements; offering a bursary to WP students; and liaising with employers to reduce the costs associated with the application process.

*Recommendation 4: Improve the timing and accessibility of sandwich course information.*

HEPs should seek to provide students with easily accessible information about sandwich courses early in the students' first year of study. Simultaneously, HEPs should actively encourage collaboration between the student service teams supporting learners with specific needs (e.g., those supporting disabled students) and the employability team promoting the uptake of sandwich courses to ensure the provision of information is timely and accessible.

*Recommendation 5: Enhance support provided to students.*

HEPs should enhance the support offered to WP students considering a sandwich course as well as to those who have already enrolled in such a course. This should include individual-level support when students are first considering their options, enabling trusting relationships between the student and their designated placement tutor. The continuation of tutor support (and connection to the HEP more generally) while the student completes their sandwich course and as they reintegrate back into their final year of study is also recommended. Final year support includes: helping students to reflect on the skills and knowledge developed during the placement year; assisting students to effectively draw upon experience in job applications; and ensuring that students' academic skills are at an appropriate level for the last year of their degree.

Many of these recommendations would benefit all higher education students, not just those from WP backgrounds.

## **7.2 Suggestions for further research**

As has been highlighted at various points in this report, the quality of data about participation in sandwich courses currently collected by HEPs limits what can be said about the participation of WP students in such opportunities. If this is remedied, as suggested in Recommendation 1, then further research should draw on more robust data to examine patterns of participation across the sector, with respect to both WP students in general and specific WP category groups (e.g., disabled students, underrepresented ethnic groups, former recipients of free school meals).

Furthermore, Phase Three of research, the user testing component, was designed to focus on WP students. Whilst this was instructive in reflecting on and developing our Theory of Change, it would also be useful to collect staff views on the content of the Theory of Change and the proposed activities.



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## 9. Appendices

### Appendix 1: Interview schedule for HEP staff (Phase One)

- Can you tell us briefly about your own role in your organisation, with respect to sandwich courses?
  
- How do you/your organisation define sandwich courses? (E.g. thick/thin/year in industry) And how are they organised?
  - How much time do they have to spend on the sandwich placement (e.g. minimum/maximum number of months)?
  - Are they paid or not?
  - Are they credit-bearing? Do they count towards the final degree classification?
  
- What percentage of your students go on sandwich courses? To what extent has this changed over time? What are the reasons for any changes?
  
- Do you collect statistics about the social characteristics of those participating in their sandwich courses? If so, would you be able to share these with us and/or describe key patterns?
  
- How does your higher education provider (HEP) promote sandwich courses (before students arrive as well as after)?
  
- To what extent does your organisation have any equality gaps in the uptake of sandwich courses? Please provide details (e.g. gaps in which metrics – gender, ethnicity, low participation areas, other). [NB If they do not have data on this, ask about their perceptions of gaps.]
  
- What do you perceive to be barriers to participation in sandwich courses for students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds?

- [Ask about any specific WP categories that are not covered in the initial response e.g. low income family; low participation neighbourhood; first in family; care experienced; disabled; young carer; underrepresented ethnic group; estranged; mature; traveller]
- Where do you think these perceptions come from? What has informed them?
- Do you think these barriers differ from the ones encountered by the general student population? If so, how/why?
  
- What actions, if any, has your HEP undertaken to increase uptake of sandwich courses by this group? How effective have these been? How/why?
  - How have you evaluated their effectiveness (if at all)?
  - What actions do you think you *could* take, to increase uptake?
  
- Have you collected any evidence about the impact of sandwich courses on the subsequent employment of your students? If so, please describe.
  - If there is evidence, what is the time frame (e.g. employment immediately after graduation, one, two, five years after graduation)?
  - If there is not evidence, how do you think we might be able to build a better understanding of the impact of sandwich courses?
  
- Is there anything else on this topic that you think it is important for us to know?
  
- [If they have not been able to answer the questions very well: Is there anyone else in your organisation that you would recommend us speaking to about this topic?]

## Appendix 2: Interview schedule for students (Phase One)

[NB Different interview schedules were written for four groups of students: Level 6 (final year) students who had taken a sandwich year; Level 6 students who had not taken a sandwich year; Level 5 (second year) students who were considering taking a sandwich year; and Level 5 students who were not considering taking a sandwich year. However, as all four schedules followed a similar structure and asked similar questions, we have included in the Appendix only one of the four versions.]

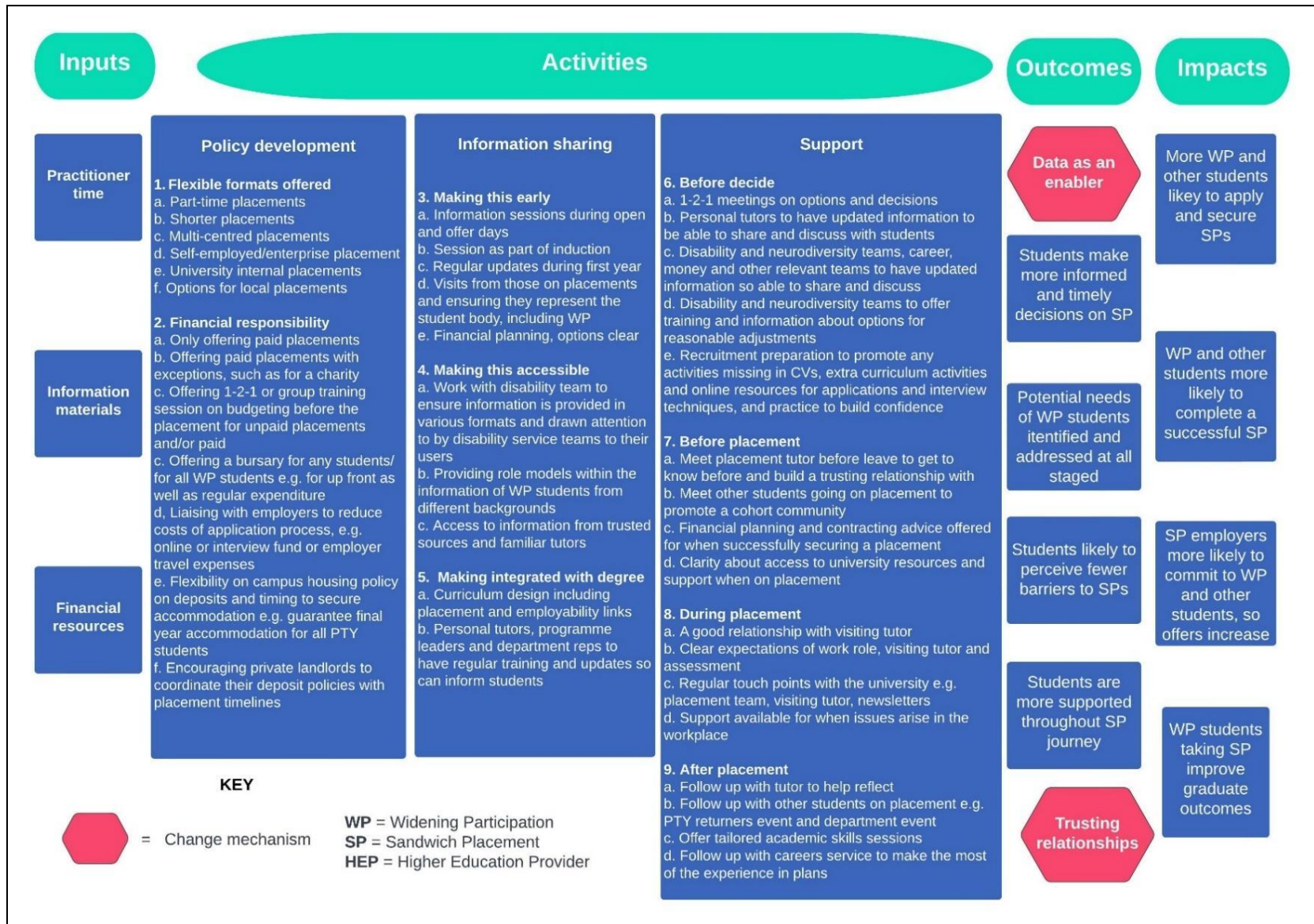
### FOR LEVEL 6 STUDENTS WHO HAVE TAKEN A SANDWICH YEAR

- Please tell us about yourself – including your background before coming to higher education, and your experiences since starting your degree course.
  
- Why did you choose this particular degree course?
  - What sources of information did you make use of (e.g. online IAG, campus visits, information from family, peers, teachers)?
  
- When you were considering your options when at school/college, did you think about whether or not sandwich courses were available? Why do you think this was?
  - If so, at what point did these questions come up?
  - What was your view of sandwich courses at this time? Why?
  
- [If not covered by questions above] When did you first become aware of the possibility of taking a sandwich course? How did you find out it was an option? What made you curious to explore the option?
  
- What factors did you consider when deciding whether or not to take a sandwich course? Which were the most important? Why?
  
- What sources of information and/or support, if any, did you make use of when you were deciding whether or not to take a sandwich course? Which are the most useful? Why?
  - How did you come across this information/support?

- When you were considering whether to take a sandwich course, did you encounter (or anticipate) any barriers? If so, what were they? How important were they? To what extent did they have a bearing on your final decision?
- What could be done to overcome these barriers (if any are identified)?
  - If you could go back and help your younger self, what help would you offer?
  - Are there any key people who you think could help you overcome barriers (e.g., peers, family, academic staff, personal tutor, careers advisers)?
- To what extent do you think sandwich courses are important for future employment?
- Please describe your experiences on your sandwich year.
- What did you learn or develop during the sandwich year (e.g., skills, knowledge, attitudes)? Which do you consider the most important? Why?
- How did it match your expectations?
- Did you experience any barriers or obstacles during your sandwich year? If so, what were they? How did you overcome them?
- Do you think your experiences were similar to those of other students? Please explain.
- What more could be done to support students on sandwich courses?
- To what extent do you think your sandwich course will have an impact on your employment once you have finished your time in higher education? Please explain.
- Is there anything else on this topic that you think it is important for us to know?



**Appendix 3: Theory of Change diagram for user testing (short version for use with students)**





#### **Appendix 4: Interview schedule for students (Phase Three)**

[NB Different interview schedules were written for four groups of students: Level 6 (final year) students who had taken a sandwich year; Level 6 students who had not taken a sandwich year; Level 5 (second year) students who were considering taking a sandwich year; and Level 5 students who were not considering taking a sandwich year. However, as all four schedules followed a similar structure and asked very similar questions about the Theory of Change, we have included in the Appendix only one of the four versions.]

##### FOR LEVEL 6 STUDENTS WHO HAVE TAKEN A SANDWICH YEAR

- Please can you confirm that you have done a placement and also that your background aligns with one of the widening participation categories?
  - Clarify which category/s if the information is not offered.
- Could you tell us about your degree and the placement you undertook?
  - Format of the placement, type of workplace and role, where, length?
- What factors did you consider when deciding whether or not to take a sandwich course? Which were the most important? Why?
- Please describe your experiences on your sandwich year and if the year as a whole met your expectations.
- Do you think your experiences were similar to those of other students? Please explain.
- To what extent do you think your sandwich course will have an impact on your employment once you have finished your time in higher education? Please explain.
- As part of this project, we're trying to understand the extent to which various activities may help students (when deciding whether to take a placement year and during their placement year) and what actions/behaviours/changes may follow as a

result of these. I'd like to talk you through some of our suggested activities, to get your views.

*Share model on screen in version sent to student in advance. Reiterate they do not need to understand it all, but it is the basis for a few questions and their responses will be very useful. Taking each of the change types in turn [Policy, Information and Support] ask...*

- From your reading of the document before the interview, would any of the activities under the [policy/information/support] heading have been helpful to your placement journey?

#### Prompts

- For each activity mentioned by the student ask (i) why is it important/how it would have helped; (ii) about short-term outcomes (e.g. how it might make them feel – more relaxed, like I know what to do next); (iii) longer-term outcomes (e.g. made decision-making easier)
- Do these activities address the particular challenges you faced? If so, how/why?
- Would they have made your placement more successful or enjoyable? If so, how/why?
- How would you prioritise these activities?
- Would anything listed have been counter-productive?
- Are there any activities not mentioned here which you experienced and were helpful?
- Are there any activities which should be on here as they could have made a difference to you?

- Is there anything else on this topic or on the model you have seen that you think it is important for us to know?

**Appendix 5: Final version of Theory of Change diagram ([see full document here](#))**

